



## A Look at Teacher Pay Rankings

by Amy K. Frantz

The National Education Association (NEA) recently released its annual ranking of average teacher salaries among the states. For the 2003-2004 school year, Iowa's average teacher salary was \$39,432. According to the NEA report, this ranks Iowa at number 38 in the nation for average teacher salaries.<sup>1</sup>

Not surprisingly, this report evoked calls from state and local teachers' unions for increased spending for education in the state, particularly to increase pay for teachers. In the *Burlington Hawk Eye*, Pat Rod, President of the Burlington [Iowa] Education Association, stated that Iowa teachers deserve better. "On the basis of test score comparisons with other states, Rod said Iowa has always had some of the highest scoring students in the country. 'Ours are right up there, but we're paid 38<sup>th</sup>,' she said. 'That's hurtful.'"<sup>2</sup>

Leaving aside Rod's apparent advocacy for basing teacher pay on merit and student achievement, I believe there is at least one item we must consider before we pour even more state and local money into education and teacher salaries: cost of living.

The NEA report found that the highest average teacher salary was in California, where the average teacher salary was \$58,287.<sup>3</sup> However, the cost of living in many California cities is much higher than most Iowa cities.

The official web site of the National Association of Realtors has a cost of living comparison calculator.<sup>4</sup> If you were considering moving from one city to another in the United States, you could type in your current salary, and find out how much you would need to earn to maintain a similar lifestyle in the new city.

If an Iowa teacher living in Des Moines and making the state average salary of \$39,432 decided to move to San Francisco, California, the teacher would have to earn \$96,865 in order to have a similar lifestyle, including owning their home. (The teacher would only have to earn \$66,710 in San Francisco if a rental property is acceptable.) But the average teacher pay in California is only \$58,287. It would appear that San Francisco teachers are extremely underpaid compared to those lucky teachers in Des Moines, Iowa.

San Francisco is a large city, so of course its cost of living would be higher than Des Moines, Iowa. However, when we compare Des Moines to the two California cities closest in size to Des Moines<sup>5</sup>, the result is similar. A teacher from Des Moines earning \$39,432 would need to earn \$77,557 in Glendale, California and \$69,152 in Fremont, California — both higher than the average teacher salary in California.

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I can hear the teachers' union representatives arguing: there are other factors to consider. That is my point, exactly. I realize that the average teacher pay in California is just that, an average. Teachers in cities with higher costs of living are likely paid more than in cities with lower costs of living. The same is true from state to state, and Iowa (fortunately for those of us living here) has more cities and towns with lower costs of living than states such as California.

Simply figuring the average teacher salary and ranking them by amount doesn't tell us much, unless we consider other factors, such as the differences in cost of living — from state to state and city to city. Whether benefits are included in the salary level should also be considered. The *Burlington Hawk Eye* article includes a comparison of average salaries at schools in southeast Iowa. The superintendent of the school at the bottom of this ranking points out that his school "does not include anything more than base state and local teacher pay dollars," thus making his school district's average pay seem lower than other schools. Teachers in that district receive supplemental pay from a state teacher retention program and are given the choice to supplement their income even further if they choose not to participate in the school's health insurance.<sup>6</sup>

School officials interviewed by the *Burlington Hawk Eye* point out that education budgets are tied to the number of students enrolled. Schools with declining enrollment are getting less funding, even though the fixed costs associated with running a school may not be declining.

When making decisions about education funding, State Legislators and school officials should consider the number of school districts in Iowa. There were 370 school districts in Iowa for the 2003-2004 school year.<sup>7</sup> Does the state really need an average of nearly four school districts per county, each with its own Superintendent and administrative support staff? Policy makers should look at promoting consolidation, if not of the schools themselves, then at least consolidating some of the administrative duties of school districts in Iowa.

#### **Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup>Diane Heldt, "Teacher pay ranking slips," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, December 1, 2004, p. 5B, col. 2.

<sup>2</sup>Craig T. Neises, "Teacher pay lags in area," *Burlington Hawk Eye*, December 4, 2004, p. 1A, col. 5.

<sup>3</sup>Diane Heldt, "Teacher pay ranking slips," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, December 1, 2004, p. 5B, col. 2.

<sup>4</sup>The National Association of Realtor's cost of living comparison calculator is found at [www.homefair.com](http://www.homefair.com). All cost of living comparisons were made using this source. (December 7, 2004).

<sup>5</sup>"2000 Census: U.S. Municipalities Over 50,000: Ranked by 2000 Population," [www.demographia.com/db-uscit98.htm](http://www.demographia.com/db-uscit98.htm) (December 7, 2004). The population of Des Moines is 198,682. The populations of Fremont and Glendale, California are 203,413 and 194,973, respectively.

<sup>6</sup>Neises, p. 1A, col. 5.

<sup>7</sup>Iowa Public School District Directory: 2003-2004 School Year, [www.state.ia.us/educate/fis/pre/eddata/ied04/ied04a.xls](http://www.state.ia.us/educate/fis/pre/eddata/ied04/ied04a.xls) (December 8, 2004).

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